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ABSTRACT

Historically, the chosen method of discipline in United States schools has gone from corporal punishment to an emphasis on suspension. Recently, as principals have become less certain about the extent of their authority to suspend students, many inschool programs have been developed as alternatives to suspension. Among the advantages of such programs are its provisions for encouraging students to complete regular classroom assignments and for preventing students from roaming around the community. Successful inschool alternative-to-suspension programs share many of the same objectives, including identifying and remedying root problems and helping students develop self-discipline. Other shared characteristics include strict disciplinary rules in inschool suspension rooms, professional or paraprofessional supervision, and low student-teacher ratios. The three basic types of alternative-to-suspension programs focus on availability of counseling and guidance, timeout (or cooling-off) rooms, and inschool suspension centers. Other innovative alternatives include after school counseling clinics, hall monitors, work-study programs, and alternative schools. Although alternative programs thus far have had little impact on improving academic achievement, the fact that they are meeting many needs of disenchanted students suggests further experimentation should continue. (JBM)

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# The Evolution of Discipline: Alternative to Suspension Programs

by
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Education 598

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"As one of the most volatile and prennial problems facing the schools and society, student discipline has so exercised our consciousness that intervention has occurred by not only school administrators and staff, but also, by the courts and government bodies."[1] But, student discipline problems have been present in our school systems since their conception. School administrators have used a multitude of methods aimed at modifying the errant behavior exhibited by students. These methods have ranged from severe corporal punishment administered by school staff personnel to very loosely organized programs of self-discipline developed by the students themselves through a learning process.

As one might expect, neither of these programs are ideally suited to handle disciplinary problems in a school. The latter method is too time consuming. Administrators and staff personnel burdened with the problem of implementing behavior modification programs on a continuing basis would have little or no time to devote to the development of academic skills. The former method frees the staff to devote more time to improving the academic skills of the students, but it only temporarily modifies the unacceptable behavior exhibited by students.

It is universally accepted that the answer to student discipline problems lies somewhere between the two methods previously mentioned. But, what is the solution to this complex problem. Educators have been debating this question since the beginning of time and have continued to develop new innovative programs that meet the needs of some students. but fall short of meeting the needs of many other students.

The purpose of this paper is to briefly look at some of the historical methods of dealing with student discipline and to describe the changing trends in dealing with student discipline problems that eventually lead to the development of alternative education programs for students with disciplinary problems. In addition, a variety of alternative programs will be described as well as the outlining of the characteristics of a good in-school alternative to suspension program.

Trends in Discipline

"The basic implication of historical and legal trends of discipline is that through disciplinary practices, we are affirming a social policy in America. Conformity to socially prescribed norms and expectations for participation in productive processes appears to be the affirmed policy."[2]

"Historically, the chosen method of discipline in the United States has been corporal punishment. The practice traces its roots back to the days of the ancient Hebrews and Egyptians who both promoted and condoned its use. The religious nature of colonial education lent itself well to the disciplining of the flesh because of the prevailing assumption that people were, by nature, corruptable and in need of being reformed."[3]

"The early nineteenth century continued the practices of colonial America. Humilliation and harshness in the forms of fines and verbal correction began to gradually replace the whipping post of colonial times. Underlying the entire process was the belief that corporal punishment would develop in students the quality of good moral character and academic excellence through the disciplining

of the mind. This philosophy would prevail until the emergence of a more enlightened viewpoint from Europe at midcentury."[4]

> Educators began to look upon the child as a good child, given the fact that the learning environment needed to be secure and that children needed to be active in the learning process. John Dewey continued to expand upon this concept by advancing the theory that a child learns to choose his actions through practice. In other words, discipline is developmental. It is unfortunate that followers of Dewey believed that this meant that children were ready for self-discipline if only left to themselves to follow their own interests. Denied a framework upon which children may build their experiences, they are doomed to act at random; and the entire progressive movement has suffered ever since because of this basic misunderstanding of Dewey's theory. Dewey had intended all along that discipline be viewed as an education problem, not an administrative problem. As discipline problems in the schools worsened as a result of the progressive education movement, administrators began to revert back to older methods of dealing with student discipline. Rules and punishment became harsher, suspensions came easier, campus security increased and courts began to become involved with student discipline problmes.[5]

As discipline in the school continued to breakdown, administrators viewed the return to corporal punishment and the use of suspensions as an expeditious means of regaining control of their schools. Suspension and corporal punishment were use as a disciplinary measure intended to produce behavioral modifications, while causing only a temporary interruption in the student's overall educational experience.

## Suspension: A Disciplinary Tool?

"The proponents of suspension have argued that the majority of the students who are interested in learning should not have to suffer from the constant disruption of the very few."[6]

> Society in general has never been especially understanding or compassionate about the disaffected and disruptive students. After all, so the thinking goes, they created their own problems and their presence in the schools is a disagreable and irritating condition that must be tolerated; if not tolerated then alleviated by their containment or removal.[7]

Advocates of suspension view the suspension process as being necessary to "provoke a crisis" to get the parents involved in the child's behavioral problems at school. Parents who have previously been unwilling to cooperate with the school are now forced to make contact with school officials. Second, "it provides a 'cooling off' period for both students and school staff who have been unable to deal with the behavior problems through other means."[8] This "cooling off" period provides the student with an opportunity to evaluate his behavior and that of other students and by this comparison, "it helps the student to learn accepted modes of conduct in a free society."[9] Finally, assuming that the student's evaluation process and the parental influence result in a decision to make a concerted effort to keep the student in school, "it forces students to comply with those established behavioral rules which are necessary to 'maintain an atmosphere conductive to learning and teaching'".[10]

As suspensions became more wikely accepted, some "schools utilized external suspensions as the sole penalty for most disciplinary problems. Sometimes the variation in discipline procedures was only in terms of the length of the suspension."[11] Although students were being suspended with greater frequency, students

were not always being suspended for every violation that was punishable by suspension. Therefore, other factors had to influence administrator's decisions concerning suspension. This arbitrary imposition of suspension raised the possibility of discrimination.

In general, suspensions are more likely to be for violation of school rules and not for violence in the school. Blacks and other minorities are suspended most often for discretionary minor offenses and for fighting. White are suspended most often for attendance problems and violations of the law. Males are twice as likely to be suspended as females and students who are poor enough to receive free lunches or reduced lunches are more likely to be suspended.[12]

The disproportionally high rate of suspension for male minority students in comparison to that of other groups raises the possibility of racial discrimination as being a major factor in determing who is to be suspended.

> Others suggest that disproportionate suspension rates could be better explained by the fact that schools are middle class institutions with middle class people teaching and administering them. It is the different cultural orientation of the largely low socio-economic status of minority students in comflict with the middle class orientation of the school that explains their higher suspension rate, not racial bias or racial discrimination. Others consider that academic records, not race, are the better explanation of student suspension, since regardless of race, most suspended students are academically deficient.[13]

The actual reason for the disproportionally high rate for suspension of minority students is of little consequence to the students and their parents. "The temporary removal of students from school

not only fails to solve the problem of student misbehavior, but the arbitrariness of such removal could worsen school disciplinary problems."[14]

The schools of America began to "come under increasing pressure from civil rights and child advocracy groups to abandon their 'outmoded' methods of discipline in favor of more 'human methods' of resolving student problems."[15] These groups list a variety of weaknesses in the present policies of student suspensions. At present those students most often affected by student suspension are in the greatest need of adequate educational experiences in order to improve their socio-economic status. Students already academically deficent will miss all work while suspended. Students are not allowed to make-up graded assignments while suspended and teachers are reluctant to help students catch up on work missed during their suspension. This problem is even more disturbing when one considers that a student may be suspended when their difficulties are in only one or two areas or with only one individual teacher or administrator. The student is now removed from the entire school program and in many cases he is unsupervised during his period of suspension. Single parent families or the economic necessity of both parents working often place the suspended student free to roam the community and increases his chance of coming into contact with a delinquent subculture. If the student is suspended on several occasions over a period of time, his chances for academic success are severly limited, he is labled as a troublemaker and his alienation is further

reinforced by his physical exclusion from school. This student now begins to view suspension as "several days of freedom" and is likely to try to get suspended and many will quit school early to avoid the hassle.[16]

Much of what "has been done in the name of discipline in schools has been rationalized as being 'good for the child.' However, by depriving him of all or part of the instructional program we are not acting in his best interest."[17] Based on a belief that disciplinary measures were imposed indiscriminately and a desire to insure that the best interest of the student were protected, parents began to challenge the right of the school to suspend students. "Although case law is unclear as to whether a pupil may be suspended or expelled permanently from school, it is generally accepted that short term suspensions of ten days or less is permissible if the student is afforded minimum due process"[18] However, court rulings appeared to be inconsistant and "with parents challenging suspensions indiscriminately how can the principal seperate suspensions supported by the court from those voided by the courts?"[19] Court decisions have been instrumental in changing suspension procedures. Their major impact was to cause uncertainty among all principals about the extent of their authority to suspend students. Principals began to avoid suspending students and to look to alternative solutions to disciplinary problems.

## Alternatives to Suspension

> Today's principal, working to resolve student discipline problems, faces a serious dilemma. On the one

> hand the Gallup Poll reports that the public expects tough discipline and teachers expect the effective correction of misbehaving students. On the other hand, numerous court decisions restrict the options available to principals for disciplining students and parents may hurl legal challenges at the school regardless of the nature of the offense.[20]

As a result, many "in-school alternative to suspension" programs have been developed. This general term referrs to a variety of programs that have been established that provide a continuation of educational opportunities for students who have committed an offense that formally would have resulted in an out-of-school suspension. The implementationof "in-school alternative to suspension" programs is an important sten forward in the development of disciplinary procedures to insure that the best interests of all students are protected.

> The rationale supporting every disciplinary action should be two fold. First, the action should attempt to modify the individuals future behavior. Second, it must protect others in the school environment. In-school suspension satisfies the above requirements and adds a third dimension by protecting the community from delinquent behavior that might occur during the unsupervised time of regular suspension.[21]

The establishment of an in-school alternative to suspension program provides a wide range of advantages over the traditional out-of-school suspension programs. A few of these advantages are as follows:

1. While the student is in the suspension room, he does his usual assignments provided by his regular classroom teacher under the supervision and guidance of the suspension room teacher.

2. Students are in the school building for the entire day, rather than roaming around the community.

3. Students may be suspended from any number of classes-in-school suspension is not an "all or nothing" proposition. For this reason, it is easy to remove students temporarily from only those classes in which they are having severe difficulties, while allowing them to pursue the rest of their regular program.

4. Getting suspended loses much of its appeal when students realize that they will be supervised and required to do their work instead of being "set free."

5. Students can be returned to classes from which they have been suspended at the discretion of the administrator and suspension teacher, without the need for formal reinstatement with parents present.

6. Students are available so that the school may use its support service team to help toward solution of the problem which resulted in the suspension.

7. Formal documentation is unnecessary and the student therefore avoided the establishment of an ongoing record that could adversely affect his school career.

8. The school does not perpetuate the student's alienation by excluding him physically.

9. The school continues to recieve state aide for the student through average daily attendance.[22]

The advantages of an "in-school alternative to suspension" program have resulted in the development of a multitude of programs purporting to be true alternatives to conventional forms of education. Many of them were doomed to failure because the school systems did not properly identify the root of the discipline problems in their school nor did they provide for counseling to implement behavior modification programs in both students and parents involved in their program.

> School officials must be willing to come to grips with the fact that the root problem of a student's misbehavior may be found in whole or in part to: (1) school-related (2) peer-related (3) home-related (4) community-related or (5) cultural/racial-related factors. Often schools are unwilling to acknowledge or address school related factors.[23]

Establishing alternative to Suspension Programs

Although many alternative programs have resulted in dismal failures, many other programs have proved to be very successful. Although these successful programs differ greatly in their specific methods, they do share a variety of characteristics that appear to insure some degree of success. In-school suspension alternatives should be developed for the purpose of:

1. Helping the child

2. identifying and remedying the root problem(s) responsible for the real or perceived commission of a disciplinary offense

3. helping students develop self-discipline

4. gain knowledge about the factors contributing to discipline-related problems and initiating preventive measures to reduce those problems

5. eliminating the use of out-of-school disciplinary suspensions for all offenses except those which clearly threaten the security of the school community

6. providing a framework within which school personnel can work on achieving the first five goals while enabling the majority of the students in the school to continue to participate, without interruption, in the school's instructional process.[24]

Once a school system has decided to develop an alternative to

suspension program for the proper reasons, it is equally important that they use sound judgement in designing the specific program that they plan to implement. There are no assurances that any one program will meet the needs of a particular school, but a review of several successful alternative disciplinary programs identified the following common characteristics which appear to produce some degree of success:

1. Strict disciplinary rules are required in in-school suspension rooms.
2. In-school suspension room is supervised by a professional or a para-professional.
3. Students receive some form of guidance while in in-school suspension.
4. The program gives students an opportunity to earn free time for good behavior.
5. Volunteers are used in tutoring or interaction.
6. Staff training which emphasizes teaching and behavior modification techniques is provided.
7. The entire school staff is involved to some degree.
8. Community agencies are utilized to solve student-school-family problems.
9. Parents are involved in the disciplinary process.
10. Contracts are signed by students.
11. At least one room is utilized exclusively for in-school suspension.
12. Isolation of students to some degree is practiced.
13. Measures are taken to intervene before a student disciplinary problem becomes severe.
14. Students are required to complete regular

class assignments while assigned to in-school suspension.

15. In-school suspension may be full-time or part-time, depending on the nature of the behavior and who it affects.

16. A home-school coordinator and parent counseling is a vital link in reducing disciplinary problems.

17. Requirements of the program are fully explained and a commitment to abide by the rules received from the students and their parents.

18. Time-out rooms are provided for students to think out or talk out problems.[25]

19. Low student-teacher ratio.[26]

Alternative to Suspension Programs

Although there are an endless variety of different in-school alternative to suspension programs, the majority of these programs can be divided into three general models with individual programs differing only slightly in their methods of identifying and entering students into a program, the specific methods used to assist the identified students in coping with their behavioral problems and the criteria and methods used to return the student to the regular classroom or to eliminate him from school. These programs are (1) Counseling/guidance programs, (2) time-out rooms, and (3) in-school suspension centers.

The following is a brief description of these three models:

Counseling and Guidance Programs

These programs are designed to provide guidance and counseling services. Since these programs only focus on counseling, the amount of time spent by students depends on the seriousness of the offense, the length of a daily counseling session, and the success of

therapy. The referral process is less rigid and a teacher or parent can refer a student to the counseling program. The size of the staff is generally small. Some school districts compensate by using additional services from graduate school interns, para-counselors and social workers. It is imperative that one room be available where non-interrupted counseling can take place.

Time-out Rooms

These programs are usually in a classroom or small facility in the school building where a student is assigned to "cool off" for a specified time of one to three class periods per day. The time-out rooms are used for short-term suspension. They serve a better purpose than sending a student to sit in the principal's office. A student is assigned to this room following a classroom disruption that could lead to suspension or expulsion. Most rooms are staffed with one or two individuals who serve as guidance counselors and/or monitors of academic activities which the student is normally responsible for when he is in class. Some programs require that the student just sit there in silence and reflect on the prior incident. Another option also exists in which the student writes a behavioral contract for his/her conduct in school. This contract can be signed by the parent or the staff person in charge of the program or both. It is up to the administrator to decide when the student may leave this room. The administrator can give this authority to the monitor. Since these programs are for a short time, they limit the amount of academic services a student can receive.

In-School Suspension Centers

These programs are an extention of the time-out rooms. Students can spend one day or an entire semester in the center. The referral process is the same as the time-out room from the teacher to the principal. These programs are staffed with a minimum of three persons. These persons are responsible for providing academic work, guidance services, and maintaining contact between the home and the school. Assignments may come solely from the regular teacher or may be supplemented

> by the individual who is accountable for the teaching in the center, depending on the length of time spent by a student in the program. The teacher, guidance counselor, and home-school liason person plan group counseling or "Rap" sessions, audio-visual presentations and value-oriented games. In this program the imposition of restrictions vary on students. Most programs within this category attempt to limit the amount of contact students have with their classmates through a modular academic and lunch schedule. The success of the program depends on the successful management of the center, the amount of structure incorporated into the daily activities, and the enthusiasum and rapport that help students in forming more positive impressions of responsibility and self-discipline as well as increasing their academic motivation and self-concept.[27]

With the endless variety of in-school alternatives, it would be impossible to describe all of these different programs. However, a brief description of some of the more innovative programs that deserve mention is as follows:

Ombudsperson

> This alternative is not as widely used as some other strategies. Ombudspersons serve as mediators in student-teacher conflicts, parent-administrator-teacher disagreements, and in student crises. Moreover, they act as liaisons between students and teachers and seek to enhance communication, as well as serve as spokespersons for facilitating students' requests to the faculty as in the case of extra-curricular activities. The model has been tried in many areas, but very few currently remain as viable strategies for reducing out-of-school suspensions.

After School Counseling Clinics

> These programs are positive alternatives to the normally punitive detention center approach. A program in Lafayette, Louisiana, has students meet for one and a half hours after school and utilizes values clarification and decision making techniques. Students talk out their problems with two staff persons in a group counseling format. The staff members are part of the regular teaching staff and are paid out of the regular school budget and with Emergency School Aid Act ( ESAA ) funds. Students are

taken home by a regular school bus, and parents are informed of the students' participation in the clinic. The model works well for this small district but would encounter major problems of implementation in large urban areas.

Hall Monitors

This kind of "roving counselor" approach seeks to identify crises and students having problems immediately, and serves the purpose of providing intervention before major conflicts ensue. The model is preventive in scope and does not require the use of additional financial assistance from the local board or State or Federal Governments.

Pupil Problem Teams

These itinerant personnel usually comprise a counselor, social worker, psychologist, and often a parent. Regular visits are made by these individuals to schools within the geographic area or when the need arises at a particular school.

School Survival Courses

This technique is part of the regular curriculum where students are required to or may elect to take a class which provides them with strategies for becoming better learners, staying out of trouble, taking more responsibility for their behavior, and understanding the consequences of engaging in behavior that is not socially approved. This model also is preventive.

Work-Study Programs

In some cases, students may "work off" a suspension by either doing chores after school or enrolling in a program that is equally distributed between academic instruction and an assigned place of employment that pays students for their services. This type of program very often may be funded with Vocational Education funds or through the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA).

Saturday Schools and Evening Schools

These types of programs have been popular in some

areas of California, and generally require the student to spend a half day at school on Saturday or late one evening either to do academic assignments or to clean the building.

Peer Counseling Programs

Oftentimes referred to as Positive Peer Culture, this model usually entails training students in a variety of guidance fundamentals so that they can counsel their peers who get into trouble. While this approach is very effective and less threatening for the student and the teacher, limitations exist in the amount of authority that can be entrusted to the peer counselor.

Alternative Schools

Alternative schools ideally have served suspended and expelled students, as well as dropouts and those students who are unable to function in traditional school environments. They are located off-campus, provide conductive learning environments, and consist of committed staff persons who provide the motivation for students to complete their graduation requirements. Alternative schools are more long term since they seek to get at "the root" of the student's disenchantment with school. Moreover, options exist whereby the student can return to his/her regular school at any time during the school term. Models such as Urban League Street Academies have provided educational services comparable to public schools since 1965 in a variety of geographical locations throughout the United States. "Free School" and "Open Schools" also fall within this category.[28]

Alternative Programs: Are they worth the effort?

The success or failure of an alternative program can be measured by the degree to which the program achieves its stated goals. Although these goals vary greatly from one program to another, improvement in academic performance and behavior progress are frequently emphasised as desirable goals of any alternative program.

A number of implications may be drawn from the record of alternative schools in the area of academic achievement. Progress on standardized tests appears to

> be minimal or absent. Gains in nonstandardized evaluation measures seem to occur, although the validity of the insturment used may vary widely. Clearly, the special curricula which are being implemented in many areas have not produced any general increase in student achievement. Some academic grades improve, but it may be because of the structured program and the emphasis on individualized assistance.[29]

"Unfortunately, many of these improvements have been registered outside the cruicial language arts and mathematics areas. At the present time, substantial efforts remain to be carried out if alternatives schools are to be justified on academic grounds."[30]

> As in the case of the academic outcomes, the behavioral results of these efforts contain numerous ambiguities. A few conclusions do emerge. Almost universally, students in nontraditional curricula seem to develop positive attitudes toward themselves and toward their school. In many cases, these attitudes apparently triggered interest in special projects and civic activities. Unfortunately, however, alternative programs have apparently failed to transform youthful enthusiasm into youthful commitment. Increased attendance rates and a lower incidence of dropping out has yet to be followed by the development of work habits and responsibility.[31]

> The academic and behavioral information concerning alternative approaches suggests that much remains to be accomplished. Unless increases in academic achievement can be produced among enrollees, nontraditional schools seem justifiable only as holding pens which keep disruptive individuals out of regular classroom environments. Increases in enthusiasm will avail little if they cannot be translated into productive activities and habits. Positive attitudes which can be sustained only within the alternative school will soon disappear when the student encounters the larger society.[32]

Over the years, school systems in America have made tremendous strides in disciplinary procedures designed to improve the behavior

of disruptive students. After years of using corporal punishment or suspensions as a disciplinary tool, educators are now attempting to find the reasons why students become disciplinary problems and then attempt to either eliminate or minimize the source of the students problems. This transition, however, was not an easy one. As more and more students became disenchanted with traditional education programs, it should have been obvious to educators that they were not meeting the needs of these students. Unfortunately, it was the judicial system, not the educational system, of this country that first recognized the need for these changes. As the courts placed increasing pressure on school systems by limiting their authority to suspend students, the school systems began to slowly develop programs that offered disruptive students an alternative to suspension.

Now that the courts have shown us the way, it is up to the educators to develop and implement programs to meet the needs of these disenchanted students. The cost of these programs may at first seem high. But, the total cost to society is often much greater if the school systems were to loose these students. Alternative education programs will not prevent all students from dropping out of school; but, they are meeting the needs of an increasingly larger number of disenchanted students. Although no existing alternative program has produced substantial increases in either academic or behavioral development, the limited success of these programs strongly suggest that additional experimentation

should continue. Modification and refinement of existing alternative to suspension programs should be continued. We must dedicate ourselves to the development of better educational programs to meet the needs of the growing number of students that can not be properly educated within the confines of traditional educational programs.

## FOOTNOTES

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